

James Brown: Please Don't Go

by Peter Stone Brown

December 25, 2006

Late last night, or more accurately early this morning doing my final email check, I noticed the headline: "James Brown hospitalized with pneumonia." I immediately had a sinking feeling, but reading the article it didn't seem all that serious. As it turns out, he was already gone when I was reading it.

The first thing I remember about James Brown was the cape routine during "Please Please Please" which closed all his shows. I saw it on television several times during the sixties and in concert much later on and it was great every time. The best example is probably in the video of the T.A.M.I. show. Brown's announcer Danny Ray puts a cape on him as the song ends, Brown starts moving off the stage and just before he's about to leave rips off the cape and runs back to the microphone. Ray appears with another cape and it happens all over again. This would happen about four times before he finally left the stage for good. Years later I had the chance to ask Brown about this routine and he said:

It came by accident. I was doin' real well and a fellow through a towel around my shoulder and I threw it off and ran back and it kind of got to the people, so then we decided we'd get robes and it kept gettin' better and better and it become a legendary part of the act and it's kind of hard to quit. At one point I got kind of tired and wouldn't do it, like at one point I quite doin' "Please Please." That was kind of a mistake. But you livin' your life, it's a trainin' ground. And you find out the strong things that you need to do, so you keep on doin' it.

James Brown always stood apart. He was the most flamboyant, the most outrageous, the funkiest, the baddest. He had the best band, the best moves, the best clothes, the best hair. And the best music. There was something about the rhythm, about the way he used horns, the way the guitar almost crept in, and the way he screamed on top of it all, it was just downright dangerous. He wasn't called "Soul Brother Number 1" or "the hardest working man in show business" for nothing (even if he probably came up with the names). He was both. This was someone who could easily start a riot and stop them.

I probably heard most of his music in somebody's car riding around North Jersey with the Am radio tuned to WNJR from Newark. But back then even Top 40 radio mixed it up so you could hear James Brown doing "I Got You," or "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag," or "It's A Man's Man's Man's World" followed by Frank Sinatra doing "That's Life," or the Stones or the Beatles.

I still remember the first time I saw him do "Man's World" on TV, lip synching of course. Murray the K has a TV special, *Murray the K at Shea Baby*, and Brown was the closer. Of all Murray's TV specials this was one of the more preposterous since there was no audience, just all these stars miming their hits to an empty stadium. Brown of course closed the show, arriving by helicopter at the pitcher's mound, leaping out and running around the stands pretending to sing. The performance was still amazing.

Fast forward to sometime in 1979 or early 1980. James Brown is actually going to play a rock club in the Jersey suburbs Cherry Hill, New Jersey, 15 minutes from downtown Philly. Emerald City had been the famed night club, The Latin Casino, where Sinatra, Ray Charles and others would play. It was also where Jackie Wilson suffered the on-stage heart attack that put him into a coma. The Latin had closed and been turned into a disco that failed, when some young entrepreneurs from Electric Factory concerts decided to turn it into a rock club with all the disco trappings, sunken couches, space-age looking bars, strobe lights, left intact. The stage was low and it was easy to get right up front. I was a disc jockey at the time, volunteering on the University of Pennsylvania station, WXPB and had arranged to interview James Brown. Arriving at the club I was told, "You have to speak to the Reverend." "The Reverend" turned out to be Al Sharpton who wasn't too well known at the time. The interview turned out to be a press conference with three or four other reporters taking part. I've interviewed many musicians and Brown always stood out as the most professional and also the slickest in how he handled questions. At the time, he'd recently finished filming *The Blues Brothers* and career-wise he was finding more success in Europe than in the U.S.

I'll never forget this exchange between Brown and an unidentified reporter:

James Brown: When I walk out on-stage here, it's about ten percent of the reception that I get in Italy or Israel or Africa or Germany, France, Australia, like I'm 100 percent bigger there than I am here.

Reporter: Is that because you haven't been there that much and people are so much more accustomed to you here?

JB: Uh, they are taught music appreciation in depth.

The show that night was beyond amazing, the only strange part being when they stopped the proceedings so Al Sharpton could present Brown with an award. The show I'll always remember though took place in August of 1985 in North Philly at the Robin Hood Dell. The Dell is an outside venue, that once was summer home to the Philadelphia Orchestra until they built a new "Dell" on the other side of the river which was renamed the Mann Music Center. A James Brown concert at its best was more like an experience than a concert. It was part medicine show, part revival meeting and soaring energy throughout. The show starts with the band, led by saxophonist Maceo Parker, who goes out into the crowd while the guitarist exhorts the crowd to shout "Maceo, Maceo" over and over. As I wrote back then in a review for a local weekly, "The introduction alone is almost worth the price of admission. After a horn fanfare, the guitarist announces Brown's endless string of hits with the band punctuating each one dramatically. Then he gets the audience to chant James Brown, James Brown, while he shouts Jeeeeames Brownn," so when Brown finally takes the stage the crowd is fully charged."

Nobody is still during a James Brown show. The band is always dancing and the horn players when not playing keep their instruments in motion. Brown never stops for a second. His favorite trick was to shoot the microphone stand out towards the crowd while he does a split, spins around and gets back up in time to pull the stand back. This happens countless times during the night. There was no band tighter. Booker T & The MGs may have been equals, but they weren't tighter. The stops this band pulled off left you breathless. Every few songs they'd tease the crowd with the intro to "Man's World," but being the show stopper, it was always saved till near the end. Again in the middle, the show was stopped so Al Sharpton could present Brown with an award, but when the music picked up, with announcer Danny Ray leading the James Brown chant, telling the crowd to shout so loud that Bruce Springsteen (playing Philly the same night) can hear you. the energy level rose even higher. There was no doubt in my mind that James Brown could provide more excitement by moving his knee than Bruce Springsteen could generate in three hours. The audience that night at Robin Hood Dell was at frenzy level.

Three years later Brown played the Valley Forge Music Fair with Wilson Pickett opening. Valley Forge was a theater in the round with a revolving stage. The show started in the usual way with the usual

fanfare with Brown opening with "Living In America." He was barely into the song when he stopped it, growling, "This is a fucking circus, stop this thing from rotating." He then went into an incoherent rap about performing for the troops in Vietnam before finally starting the show again which went way overtime. The house lights were on and Brown's obviously pissed off road manager was fuming on-stage while Brown ran round the stage playing the organ, then the drums before finally leaving the stage 30 minutes later than he should have. A couple of months later came the famous interstate car chase which resulted in Brown going to prison for a couple of years.

I saw him when he was released, this time at the Mann Music Center. The all important energy level, the thing that made his shows stand out from every other show, where it seemed like he could stretch time, suddenly cut if off, then wrap it around his little finger, which bonded performer and audience as one was noticeably missing. The most memorable thing about the night was a completely insane stretch limo parked near the stage door that had a hot tub on top of the trunk.

That was the last time I saw him, but in the end what counted was I did see him and while maybe not at his peak, he was still beyond astounding and in terms of sheer energy, dynamics and pure showmanship, no one else came close.